

After Dinner Talk at the 35th Reunion of the Class of 1938, Mount Holyoke College

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Service Spouse Series

BARBARA GARDNER CRAWFORD

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Classmates, Husbands, and Friends:

You can't know what a pleasure it is for me to at last be able to attend a class reunion. And best of all to see how well the years have treated all of you. I can only hope that our 50th will be as gay and frisky. I am already making plans to be here at that time!

When I was asked to tell you something of Foreign Service life from a wife's point of view, I was rather hesitant, as it was something I had never attempted before. But Bill planned to come along too, and I hoped he could add to my thoughts and impressions of our 29 years in the Diplomatic Service. However, after three years of retirement he up and joined a young East-West trading firm here in Washington, and is off on a month's tour of Romania, Russia, and Czechoslovakia.

We also, in the meantime, bought a new home, and will be moving as soon as I return. With his excellent sense of timing, Bill will arrive home just in time to move into the new house. And in spite of the fact that this is our sixteenth move, there always seem to be a few small details at the last moment that make for a few unsettling worries.

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I hope you will accept Bill's very sincere regrets at not being here this evening, and that you will enjoy hearing a very few of our experiences over the years that we spent abroad.

After leaving Holyoke, I went to Katie Gibbs for awhile, then to decorating school, on to Altmanin their training force, and eventually on to Brides' School in New York. Betto had recently become engaged to Joe, and she wanted some company while she learned to cook and keep house. In retrospect, it was one of the smartest things I ever did. I learned to cook, and even won a prize at the end of the year — a lesson on how to make doughnuts! This led to better things, as when Bill heard I was learning to cook he promptly proposed. At that time he was leading the life of a bachelor in Washington, studying for the Foreign Service exams. And I suspect he didn't find cooking his “thing.”

There are several things which are helpful to the career of a Foreign Service wife. Among them are an ability to repair plumbing and electricity, and to cook gourmet meals. It helps to have naturally curly hair and a generally optimistic disposition. But best of all is to have a devoted family back home to help out the many times that problems arise when you are too far away to cope with them yourself. We were terribly lucky to have Betto and Joe in Bryn Mawr, as well as my parents for a few years. They did everything from sending packages to taking care of our children. They watched over them in schools back home, had them for vacations when we were too far away, and even, while we were in Romania, arranged Barby's wedding. We had missed both Barby's graduation from Holyoke and Polly's from Briarcliff, but we did get home one week before Barby's wedding and found it in Betto's very capable hands.

We spent our first four years in Cuba, where Barby and Polly were born. Then Bill was able to sign up for Russian language study at Harvard. He finally arrived in Moscow on V-E Day, an exhilarating event. We had to stay behind in New York till he could find some sort of housing for us. But my parents were there to help out, and while waiting I was able to study basic Russian.

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Eventually Bill found a log cabin on the outskirts of Moscow, though it needed repairs badly. Ambassador Harriman gave his permission for me to come over with the children, and Bill got started on what was to prove a lot of hard work — getting the cabin into shape for us to live in. One day I received a cable from Bill asking me to bring along a portable john, but luckily before I could find one, we heard they had turned up an extra one in the attic of Spaso House, the Embassy residence. It was safely installed, and the only problem was we had to be sure to keep a heater in the room during the winter so that the plumbing didn't freeze solid.

My father checked out the Liberty Ship I was eventually able to get passage on; Mother helped me buy ascending sizes of shoes and clothing for the girls, plus a farewell present of one of the first DDT bombs; the doctor gave us all innumerable shots; and the State Department gave us rather reluctant approval to go over. At this time there were few wives and no small children in Moscow, and living conditions were far from easy.

We sailed from the gasworks of Philadelphia in November 1945, and headed for Stockholm. For the next month I was to wear the suit I had on when I stepped on board. Not from preference, but because all my new clothes and my checkbook were stolen from the cabin just before we sailed. Luckily the children's clothes were intact, and just as I was wondering how I was going to manage without money, Bill arrived to meet us at the dock.

One of my first shocks on arriving in Moscow was seeing our lift-van. It had reached us in three parts. It seems that on its arrival, in Archangel, it was too heavy to cross the ice, so the Russians sawed it in half. Then put all the odds and ends which didn't fit, into a third crate made of slats. When we viewed Bill's desk with an inch of ice on top, my heart sank, but fortunately it was repairable. Once we moved in we found that nothing was missing from our shipment — a remarkable testament to a country ravaged by war for so long a time.

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After we spent a month searching, Pasha, our cook for the next two years, appeared on our doorstep and took charge. She found us a nice plump nursemaid named Marushia, fresh out of the Red Army by way of a collective farm, who became the delight of our two girls. Later Pasha added a cousin, who became our laundress, doing the washing in our bathtub, for we had running water there. And Bill found a Tartar caretaker, who lived behind the tiny garage with his wife, daughter and baby. They chopped our wood for the furnace, shoveled our snow, and did all the repairs such as fixing the water pipes when they burst from time to time in the winter cold. After a few months Pasha went down to her parents in the Ukraine, where she had sent her little girl for safekeeping, only to have it overrun by the Germans. She brought her child back — a pale, slim little thing who promptly joined Asia, the caretaker's daughter, at playing and eating with our girls.

As there were no small children in Moscow the first year we were there, we were delighted to have the two Russian girls in our home. We had a few dolls, a doll carriage, a swing, and a very few toys in the yard. Gradually other children slipped into the yard to play with them. Lucy, who was a natural born organizer like her mother, took charge of the group, much to our delight.

So there we all were in a tiny log cabin, with running cold water, a wood-burning stove and furnace, and a telephone. We were the envy of our Russian neighbors, as they all had to use the corner pump for water, as well as mostly outdoor plumbing, and very few had telephones.

As spring advanced, we started a garden with seeds given me by the Agricultural Attach# at the Embassy. We grew every kind of vegetable you can imagine, including corn, which made us the most popular people around when it became ripe. Later that fall we went out to a collective farm near Moscow to buy potatoes, cabbage, onions and carrots to store for the winter months ahead.

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We were lucky not to have the problem one of our acquaintances did. She had managed somehow to get a small pig, and decided to serve it whole, in style. However when the maid appeared, looking a bit puzzled, the pig was on the platter, but the apple was in the maid's mouth. Another of our friends had well-boiled tennis balls served to him by his maid, who apologized because she had been unable to get them tender.

By the time we came home in 1947, Barby and Polly had become bilingual and rather well indoctrinated. As we drove around the large statue on Ward's Circle in Washington, Barby exclaimed in Russian, "There's Stalin!" And Polly piped up "Nyet — eto Lenin!" Bill had a hard time explaining to them that it was really General Ward, a hero of our own revolution. Within six months, however, they were playing with all the neighborhood children, their Russian, alas, soon to become a thing of the past.

When we were assigned to Prague in 1957, we had five children, and school problems to resolve. Barby, Polly, and Billy were too old for the American School in Prague, so we sent them to boarding school in Switzerland. The girls spent one year there, and then went to Shipley School in Bryn Mawr to better prepare for college. Betto and my parents were there, which helped them from becoming too homesick for us, especially on vacations.

I had discovered, on arriving in Prague, that one of my duties as wife of the Deputy Chief of Mission was to run the school there, consisting of six grades. But in order to do that, we had to add on a nursery and kindergarten section. We had no household help to speak of, and no place to leave Lisa, 2, and Johnny, 4. So within a week of arriving in Prague, Bill and I drove back to Nuremberg, Germany, five hours away. We loaded up the station wagon to the gills with educational equipment, breaking a spring on the way home. There we found that 30 children had been signed up by other parents who were in the same position we were. They were a great help in getting the rooms set up, sawing off table legs to child height, and painting. The Czech government found us two teachers, and with

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volunteers from the diplomatic corps, a few weeks later, in September, we had a most successful beginning.

The upper school had an additional 70 children, from about 20 different diplomatic missions: Yugoslavs, Indians, British, Icelanders, Israelis, children from Arab nations, and many more. It was a blessing for the parents, who were naturally anxious for their children to have a good education, and I learned a great deal too. We had a micro-United Nations, but all those children got along marvelously well. Language problems seemed to cause them no difficulties at all in communicating with one another.

Our last curtain post was Romania, where Bill was assigned in 1961 as Minister when it was a Legation, and then as Ambassador when the post was raised to Embassy status. Our older three children were by then in college and boarding school, so we had to leave them behind in America. The next four years were difficult for all of us, as they were only able to visit us in their summer vacations.

In Bucharest there was no school for Lisa and Johnny to attend. Only the Soviets, among the foreign missions, had one. At first we tried tutoring, but found it difficult and frustrating. That spring we were fortunate in having the wife of the Air Attaché, Mrs. Polivka, offer to help us start up a small school. The Romanians gave us the use of a small apartment, and found us a young Romanian English-speaking teacher. That September we were able to start fall classes with two teachers, six grades, and eight children, all American. By January it was going so well that we added three more children from the Indian and Afghan Embassies. And by the time we left, there were 25. Bill recently wrote me from Bucharest to tell me that Mrs. Suma is still with the school, but it is in a new and larger location, with 80 children and eight grades, plus a flourishing kindergarten annex. Although still nominally the American School, it has become truly international.

This may sound easy to do, but the logistics in getting it started were horrendous. Everything had to be ordered months in advance. We used the basic curriculum of the

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Potomac School in Washington, and Pat Polivka ordered all the books from New York to be sent in by mail. Paper supplies, crayons, pencils and the like were picked up by me in Munich when we were out there on a trip in the summer, and I had a hard time convincing the salesgirl that I really needed so many things. The desk, chairs, and blackboard and other heavy equipment were ordered from Vienna. They came back to Bucharest on the small Air Force plane we were occasionally able to travel on. We always had nightmares that surely one time or other we wouldn't be able to land due to bad weather over the Carpathian mountains, and that the frozen food for the staff would end up in puddles as there was no refrigeration on the plane. Luckily it never happened, but I was always relieved to get back down to earth.

We did many more things in the Service than just organize schools. Bill had his office work naturally, and beyond that there was a great deal of official entertaining for visiting Americans, and especially for the people of the country where we were stationed and the other diplomats assigned there.

You have all heard the saying "I married him for better or for worse, but not for lunch." But in the Diplomatic Corps this was definitely not the case. Not only was Bill home for meals, but we very often had guests, expected or not, in to share them with us. One of the best ways to get to know people is to relax over a pleasant meal, and usually a great deal of business was conducted at the same time. Luckily I like to cook, because we weren't always so fortunate with having help as was the case in Moscow.

One of my more vivid memories of our second tour of duty in Paris is of a lunch Bill gave at our house when we had no help at all. It was a town house, with the kitchen in the basement, so I borrowed a butler from a friend, and planned the menu. The morning of the lunch, the long overdue painters arrived to paint the kitchen, and immediately started with the dumbwaiter which was used to carry up the food. So while the six ambassadors dined blissfully, unaware of the problems below stairs, the butler raced up and down the stairs

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with the platters of food, and I juggled pans to the “Pardon, Madame” of the painters as they swished paint on the ceiling overhead.

Looking back on our life in the Foreign Service, I find it hard to pick a favorite from the many posts where we served. In the so-called hardship posts, the very nature of the problems made for close enduring friendships with all the members of our own staff, as well as the rest of the diplomatic corps and people of the host country. On the other hand, who couldn't be happy in a delightful post like Paris, where we were assigned twice!

But best of all, as far as Bill was concerned, was the stimulating and rewarding work; and for me, that I was able to share in a large part of it. We look back on it with nostalgia. And you can be sure that with the pay one receives for government service, we didn't do it for money. So it had to have been for love.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: William Avery Crawford

Spouse's Position: Political specialist; Russian Language Officer; AEP

Spouse Entered Service: 1941 Left Service: 1970 You Entered Service: Same Left Service: Same

Status: Spouse of AEP, Retired

Posts: 1941-44 Havana, Cuba 1945-47 Moscow, USSR 1947-50 Washington, DC
1950-54 Paris, France 1954-57 Washington, DC 1957-59 Prague, Czechoslovakia
1959-62 Washington, DC 1962-65 Bucharest, Romania 1965-67 Paris, France
1967-70 Washington, DC

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Place/Date of birth: Haworth, New Jersey, November 5, 1917

(Died of cancer, Bethesda, Maryland, September 12, 1979)

Maiden Name: Gardner

Parents (Name, Profession):

Lt. Col. Kenneth Gardner, Senior Partner (Haight, Gardner, Poor and Havens, New York City; admiralty law firm)

Harriet Richards Gill Gardner

Schools (Prep, University):

Saranac High School, New York, diploma 1934

Mount Holyoke College, BA 1938

Profession: Foreign Service wife

Date/Place of Marriage: New York, New York, October 19, 1940

Children:

Barbara (1942)

Pauline (1944)

William Henry (1947)

John Kenneth (1953)

Elizabeth (1955)

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Volunteer and Paid Positions held: A. At Post: All positions at home and abroad volunteer. Prague - Director, American Embassy School 1957-59; Bucharest - Founded and directed American Embassy School, 1962-65. School originally had six grades, now is an eight-grade international school sponsored by Department of State with over 100 students.

B. In Washington, DC: President, FS Wives Association of National War College, while spouse attended NWC, 1956-57; After retirement, chaired AAFSW Bookfair; also accredited with Journeyman by National Guild of Decoupeurs.

Honors: Kentucky Colonel

End of interview